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# Investigations of an anti-semiote: Stanisław Lem's semiotic ideas in light of semiotic functionalism of Jerzy Pelc

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**Abstract:** At the turn of 1960s and 1970s, Stanisław Lem devoted some of his non-fiction writing to a discussion and considerations of semiotics. Most of them were expressions of a critical approach mainly directed against structuralism. However, Lem also formulated some positive statements although they were not developed systematically. The article offers an analysis of Lem's semiotic ideas from the perspective of semiotic functionalism of Jerzy Pelc, mainly considering its two main components: contextualism and typological approach. Special attention is paid to the latter because both Pelc and Lem proposed some original solutions in this respect. What is meant here is the multidimensional typology of symbolic uses of signs developed by Pelc and Lem's multidimensional typology of the situations of the reception of texts. Although they are independent from each other, these proposals show some convergence both in their ways of construction and roles they are supposed to perform. Henceforth, one can say that Lem was a crypto-functionalism.

**Keywords:** semiotic activities; semiotic functionalism; Stanisław Lem; symbolic sign; typology

Meaning is, in fact, a gradable, modifiable and reversible property even within “numerous dimensions” separately or all at once.

– Stanisław Lem

## 1 Introduction: a semiotician and an anti-semiote

In an article “A plea for semiotics,” Jerzy Pelc describes a tendency among the representatives of different scientific disciplines to shift towards semiotics, which could be considered a certain intellectual fashion. The outcomes of this fashion

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have often been productions which should be labeled as belonging to the range of applied semiotics and yet having no proper background from theoretical semiotics. In this way, someone considering themselves a semiotician while, in fact, having poor skills or nothing to do with semiotics may have given this discipline some bad reputation. This has brought much criticism upon semiotics which has also become subject to suspicious treatment. The criticism, even if justified, was not directed against semiotics, but against its imitation (Pelc 1988: 857–858). The criticism of semiotics can be justified if the reason for distrust in this discipline can be ascribed to semiotic errors. Pelc draws special attention to the error of hypostasing which relates to the term of “meaning” but also to other terms used in semiotics. The forgetfulness of the fact that the use of semiotic terms often has a character of personification is what lies behind the search of designata for semiotic terms in the empirical world. It is not the signs which mean something as much as their users mean something. In this sense, the fight with semiotic hypostases leads to “theories which stressed not the ideal entity, meaning, but semiosis as a process with its own actors, the originator and the receiver, its tools, material elements, place and time of activity” (Pelc 1988: 861). Stanisław Lem’s position and particularly his essays critical of semiotics stand out very well against such an intellectual background. Lem was not an immigrant in semiotics and as he noticed: “in this field I am an intruder” (Lem 1975c: 170). He did not pretend to be a semiotician and appointed himself an anti-semiote (Lem 1972, 1981b). However, he was a critic of semiotics in its structuralist form. Lem argued with this whole structuralist orientation *en bloc*, attacking both its foundations and its study results. Sometimes, as in an essay in *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, Lem expressed his meta-semiotic attitude quite directly: “In my opinion, semiotics as a discipline in the field of communication is not sovereign, but strongly dependent on the evolution of linguistic customs and habits, whether one wants to see it or not” (Lem 1984: 256). Although the object of Lem’s criticism was rather defined, his critical standpoint was somehow scattered. *Prima facie*, this may seem surprising, but the semiotic position which Lem implicitly opted for is a certain variety of semiotic functionalism with Jerzy Pelc being its prominent representative. The aim of the following text is to show the constructive side of Lem’s critical essays and to point out to its functionalist character. The particular sections of the text include: the discussion of the foundations of Pelc’s semiotic functionalism; a proposal of explication of main theses of Lem as a semiotician and a reconstruction of a typological model of “compass card,” i.e., Lem’s typology of receiving situations. The end of the text outlines a possible continuation of the problematics with the problem of contextualism as an example.

## 2 Semiotic functionalism and the typology of the symbolic use of signs

Jerzy Pelc is a renowned worldwide representative of the functionalist approach according to which one cannot speak of something as a sign except when it is used as a sign for something different. This use is always made by someone in a defined situational context. In this respect, the sign is not a static object, but it is used and interpreted and, therefore, takes part in a dynamic process of semiosis (Pelc 1992: 27). As Pelc puts it aptly and briefly: “there are no signs outside the use thereof, there is no sign use without sign interpretation, and there is no sign interpretation without a cognizing subject” (Pelc 1993: 26). The dynamic approach does not relate to symbolic signs but to *symbolic sign-uses*. This means that semiotic functionalism is a contextualism. The matter whether the use also covers the context or whether they are separate (Ciecierski 2021: 77) will not be investigated hereafter. Contextualized use of signs is important as a starting point for the discussion of Lem’s observations, although it will not be vastly analyzed and only detailed problems related to this use will be mentioned in the end. However, the key issue here is another subject which comes from Pelc’s semiotic analyses, namely a thesis which says that *no uses of signs are pure*. Therefore, it is not only a matter that there are indicative sign-uses or symbolic sign-uses. Additionally, none of the uses are pure and have no purely indicative uses or purely symbolic uses. The claim that in a given situation there is a symbol but not an indication is the same as the claim that the symbolic factor dominates the indicative one. Symbolic uses contain different admixtures which yet do not deprive the uses of their symbolic status (Pelc 1981: 49–50). The *thesis of the impurity of the use of signs* is paramount and it has many consequences. One of them is the fact that a given object can be in a particular use function as a symbol and in a different use as an indicator. There is no clear boundary between these functions, and symbolism is not a classificational feature which makes a clear distinction between symbols and indicators. These features are *gradable*. On the other hand, it seems plausible that the opposition “indicative-symbolic” roughly corresponds to the “pragmatic-semantic” one. However, such a correspondence has a colloquial character where deixis is indicative, and metaphor is symbolic. Still, pure uses are non-existent since every single use is both semantic and pragmatic, and so simultaneously there are both indicating and symbolic elements, although when it comes to deictic expressions the indicating element is dominant whereas the symbolic one is just a kind of admixture. Generally speaking, “the individual semantic relations are not symbolic to the same degree; similarly the individual pragmatic relations are not indicative to the same degree” (Pelc 1996: 1312). In this sense, every linguistic expression is at once an indicative and a symbolic. Therefore, there is not only

gradability in the uses of something as a sign, but additionally one deals with *mixed and heterogenous uses*. Henceforth, instead of a traditional classification of signs Pelc worked out *multidimensional typologies of the uses of signs*. The typology of the symbolic uses of sign is of particular interest in this text.

Pelc's typology starts with the explanation that despite the fact that there is no single concept of a symbol, one can still notice a tendency to distinguish between two types of symbols which Pelc neutrally calls A-symbols and B-symbols. The neutrality of these labels is justified because different authors who also apply the distinction between two types of symbols use very dissimilar terminology. This dissimilarity conceals the fact that we are dealing with the same types of symbolic signs. If one considers possibly one of the most important terminological propositions which can be called classical and refers to this distinction, one obtains the following conceptual pairs expressing two types of symbols or symbolism:

- clear and free/dark and bound (*dunkel und unfrei*; Vischer 2015)
- referential/condensation (Sapir 1934)
- discursive/presentational (Langer 1942)

Pelc calls these symbols neutral and he constructs the typology of the symbolic uses of signs. A-symbols include symbols belonging to formal languages: logical, algebraic, and expressions from ethnic languages. Symbols of type B include first and foremost religious symbols together with artistic, magical, and mythological ones. This typology is multidimensional and Pelc lists five pairs of features, where the first elements are characteristic of A-symbols, and the second ones are typical features of B-symbols. The pairs are as follows:

- arbitrary/motivated;
- emotionally neutral/expressive;
- axiologically neutral/non-neutral;
- univocal/ambiguous;
- well-defined/vague.

It is important to observe that there is no opposition between A- and B-symbols. The features listed above are gradable and a considerable part of symbolic signs belongs to the *intermediate zone*. The symbols from this zone when equipped with certain characteristics of A-symbols and different characteristics of B-symbols can be described as A/B-symbols (ex. symbols of mourning which are very much conventional but not emotionally neutral). The above features “belong *simultaneously* to the use of some thing, feature, event or activity in the role of, among others (*in some respect and to a certain degree*), a symbol of something else. ... [C]ertain features of A-symbol and certain features of B-symbol are *blended*” (Pelc 1996: 1308; emphasis

mine). The discussions relating to B-symbols often reveal the problem of *complexity or multiple stages in the relation of symbolizing*. For example, Mieczysław Wallis claims that the relation between a B-symbol and the symbolized object is not based on either similarity or convention, but rather on “some other often vague link” (Wallis 2015: 4). This link can be an analogy, a metonymy or a metaphor. Then one does not deal with the case of simple denotation, but with a complex one, where the symbolized object in a given use is also used as a sign which relates to something different than itself and from the first sign. The two-stage denotation of B-symbols is particularly emphasized in artistic symbols (Kmita and Ławniczak 2015: 75; Wallis 2015: 7). However, there can be more stages and as a result the denotation becomes complex, and also symbolizing becomes complex and composed of a series of symbols. This is a semiotically peculiar situation because there are certain *oscillations and interactions* between particular meanings:

a B-symbol is usually context dependent, and that even within the given context it is vague and ambiguous. This ambiguity is of peculiar kind. It consists in such *oscillation and interaction between the literal and metaphorical meaning of the symbol*, its cognitive and emotive meaning, that its total meaning is not a sum of these components but a function of these factors. (Pelc 1996: 1307–1308; emphasis mine)

Therefore, a continuum of the uses of signs is obtained – ranging from explicit and deictic uses to vague and dark symbols. As it will appear later, such a typological approach is very adequate to Lem’s “semiotic expedition.”

### 3 Semiotic confessions of an anti-semiote

Before the main considerations begin, certain important observations have to be made that will provide some more details referring to Stanisław Lem’s semiotics. The subject matter of this paper is neither semiotics present in the works of Lem nor a semiotic interpretation of his writings.<sup>1</sup> The semiotics which is important to this discussion is included in Lem’s theoretical dissertations and essays on the study of literature, philosophy and science. This topic was present in his papers since mid-1960s until the first half of 1970s. The matter of semiotics is widely discussed in Lem’s monumental *Philosophy of chance*<sup>2</sup> (first published in 1968). However, Lem made some corrections

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1 In matters referring to semiotic interpretations of Lem’s novels and stories, see Geier (1992, 1993), Hayles (2006), and Głaz (2014).

2 To this day (January 2021), this work of Lem still has not been translated into English. All quotations are translations of quotes coming from Polish second edition from 1975. It is also important to mention that there is an alternative version of the translation of the title of this work as “Philosophy of contingency” (Głowiński 1979: 330). Therefore, the acronym “PC” will be used throughout this text.

and make his considerations more precise in some of his essays published later. Together with PC, these essays are treated as the main source of knowledge about Lem's semiotic views and ideas because in his later numerous essays Lem rather scarcely relates to semiotics. Two essays seem to be most important, i.e., *Confessions of an anti-semiot*<sup>3</sup> and a critical essay on the theory of sci-fi literature of Tzvetan Todorov. The latter essay is especially unique as it presents Lem as an 'anti-semiot in action'. By criticizing Todorov, Lem was obligated to express his own constructive views on semiotics, and a by-product of this process was a construction of a model called "compass card," i.e., a certain multidimensional typology of the situation of reception and interpretation of any given literary work. The fact that this involves thematization of reception and an interpretation of a text was especially important because in his semiotic considerations Lem was interested in the recipient's perspective. In PC, he states clearly that he is interested in the theory of reception and not in the theory of emission or of the work itself. As far as the ontological status of the work is concerned, Lem freely admits that "the work is a linguistic utterance and therefore cannot exist differently from any other single linguistic utterance. Such an utterance can both be transmitted and received. Linguistic utterances do not exist outside transmission or reception and if somehow they exist outside then definitely not as utterances" (Lem 1975a: 52). The perspective of the recipient is crucial and, in fact, dominant. Therefore, right from the start one deals with the definition of specificity of Lem's semiotics with respect to its matters of interest, i.e., "semantic decisions – difficult for the reader" (Lem 1974: 233). One could also mention Lem's intentional thematic scope of his semiotic pursuits. Lem declared matters of literary studies to be his direct field of interest, but the actual range of his investigations is much wider. The problem of text interpretation is not limited only to the works of literature and it also refers to scientific work. However, even then Lem formulates utterances referring to language *per se* or any signs and their reception. Moreover, in the foreword to PC Lem admits that he created a hydra of many heads, and its most distinctive heads are: theory of information, linguistics, and logic (Lem 1975a: 14). The aim here is not to establish whether semiotics is a separate head of this hydra. Nevertheless, talking about the semiotics of Lem and not only about his study of literature can be considered valid.

First and foremost, Lem's criticism was aimed at structuralist approaches, mainly at their applications in the studies of literature and also generally in the studies of languages and signs. Lem was strongly critical of the static approach to the sign and of the approach of the structure seen as a network of binary oppositions. He was very definite in his criticism of structures: "In spite of appearances and

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3 Similarly to PC, no English translations are available, thus quotations are translations from Polish.

intuitions, structures 'in themselves' do not exist, and there are no other structures than the ones with respect to the observer" (Lem 1975b: 43). There is no such thing as an immanent structure of a work precedent to its reception and interpretation. It is the reception that gives the text a certain structuring which is strongly dependent on the strategies taken by the recipients. Structurings of texts are produced in the process of social stabilization of the reception of these texts. Lem claimed that the static-synchronic approach caused much damage to contemporary humanities. However, as he himself stated, "there is one tendency which I find exceptionally disastrous. It is present in segmentations and classifications used by prominent specialists which *aspire to be hypostases*" (Lem 1972: 78; emphasis mine). This refers to the fact that the static view of signs reifies their meanings, but this also involves the fact that the use of divisions based on acknowledging the presence of dichotomic features is arbitrary. The disregard of this arbitrariness may result in the error of reification – what is chosen as a conceptualization to investigate a given phenomenon tends to be treated as a discovery of an objective state of affairs. Henceforth, Lem was an opponent of classification but an active supporter of typological approaches. Lem's perspective is theoretically supported by his thesis which can be described as a *semantic confession of an anti-semiote*:

'in fact,' *language is not a relational system* stretched between the functions of designating, denoting and operating with concepts. It is about convenient constructs, the effects of procrustean immobilization of linguistic utterances, practical divisions which orderly and separately make available to us the things which, in fact, *the language makes continually and simulatively*. (Lem 1972: 78; emphasis mine)

This is clearly an anti-structuralist thesis. However, one can observe that Lem takes a step further because he mentions not only the structure as seen in structuralist semiology, but also the structures as viewed in logical semantics since he refers to the function of denoting. In this respect, one can say that Lem as an anti-semiote strongly opposed to reification of structures. However, this does not mean that his thesis is anti-system as for Lem there are no signs outside the system of signs and there are no signs outside their uses. In the same essay Lem also criticizes atomistic semantic theories. For him language is a *system of signs – open and dynamic* – not a static structure. Such a view of a language-system can be described as a *syntactic confession of an anti-semiote*. To illustrate the characteristics of such a system of signs, Lem uses an example of how something unsaid (because of being indecent) is, in fact, interpreted by recipients as the sign of the thing unsaid. Thus, the role of the recipient is crucial here, since the sender did not foresee such a situation because of being unequipped with the same interpretation strategies as other seasoned recipients. What seems to be intentionally unsaid by the sender is a sophisticated sign of the unsaid for the recipient. In this respect: "when it comes to

the reception of signs, one encounters *horror vacui* – the recipient fills the presumed void with a ‘semantic reflex’” (Lem 1972: 71). The key matters there are the linguistic and cultural competences of the recipients, which Lem frequently points out. Yet, one needs a certain bigger whole to make such a filling possible, i.e., a treatment of the omission of the use of sign as a sophisticated use. When encountered with a certain noticeable discontinuity in a system, recipients fill it adequately to their linguistic and cultural competence. However, a fundamental problem may arise related to the closer characteristics of a language viewed in such a way. Language is not an abstract structure, and not just a collection of expressions – it is, indeed, a system. One can come up here with an interpretative hypothesis that this is all about a *system of the activities of uses of signs* different from a language-system, i.e., *semiotic activities*. As Pelc observes: “The *semiotic activities* developing in time, are *organized* in some way” (Pelc 1993: 37; emphasis in original). It seems that such an interpretation can be applied to many attempts taken by Lem to explain the semiotic status of literary works. It would be worthwhile to consider the following rather enigmatic passage from PC:

And so particular parameters appear to be unchangeably set in the work, since its text is – as a linguistic utterance – neither literally shiftable nor changeable, the receptions function in such ways that these *parameters act as variables, depending on the strategy applied*. ... [E]very system, also the immobile one, which is complex enough can therefore be – and *not metaphorically* – treated as a *different number of subsystems variously interconnected*. (Lem 1975a: 198; emphasis mine)

It is obvious that Lem used the cybernetic understanding of a system, but he also modifies it trying to adapt it to his own needs and – which is even more evident because of the quotation above – uses this concept to replace the concept of structure. It also appears that the concept of the *organization of semiotic activities* as something different from the language-structure seems to fit to periphrases used by Lem. Firstly, the process of semiosis is dynamic and changeable in time. Secondly, semiotic activities are activities of the users of signs – the creation of signs, their communication and processing (Pelc 2000: 428). As one can conclude from the above passage from PC, Lem was very much interested in the processing of signs by the recipients. Thirdly, a crucial thing in the process of semiosis is the use of something (a certain A) as a sign, and this is not an easy activity in spite of appearances:

one must perceive this A as such-and-such an object, event, property or phenomenon, and hence, applying conceptualization, single it out from the environment and *recognize it as belonging to a certain system*: sometimes as part of a certain whole, sometimes as an element of a certain set, and in other cases still as a link in a chronological sequence, etc. (Pelc 1993: 27, emphasis mine)



The characteristic of the organization of semiosis offered by Pelc is open, since it is in a way organized within a bigger unit, but at the same time it is not presupposed what it can be and how it can be organized. In this respect, combining the investigations of Pelc and Lem, one deals with the possibility of different decompositions of the bigger unit into “a different number of subsystems variously interconnected,” depending on the applied conceptualization. This interconnection is obviously not a structure, and therefore Lem attempted to make it more specific with the use of other terms. He wrote of, for example, *signal sequences* or *collections of meaningful signals* (Lem 1975a: 236–237). However, those phrases were temporary and the phrase that Lem used in the final parts of PC and in *Confessions* is an *attuning of signs* (Lem 1972: 71, 1975b: 217). This attuning is what “the language makes continually and simultaneously.” As it has already been mentioned, this is an expression of a typological attitude to the analysis of signs. Lem intentionally and consciously created the typology of, e.g., textual inconsequences (Lem 1981a) or favors of literary worlds to human fate (Lem 1981c). Although a certain personification is used here, Lem means the process of semiosis where the semiotic activity of the recipients of signs is paramount. Those elements of this activity are important where the recipient “performs the activity of analyzing the received message, as well as the preceding or *simultaneous activity of its interpretation*” (Pelc 2000: 429; emphasis mine). Even if one deals with the simultaneity of analyses and interpretations to the point where these activities are difficult to differentiate, they are still the two phases of reception which is eventually aimed at the understanding of the message. An analysis often performs a selective and arranging function and it is clear that this can be done in many different ways. An analysis is an activity which is supposed to make an understanding of signs easier, and interpretation is an activity of arriving at an understanding. If the analysis and the interpretation are treated as activities – phases of the process of semiosis – then the understanding should be treated in a similar manner. Lem discussed the concept of understanding extensively, and a concise expression of his attitude is the *pragmatic confession of an anti-semiote* which can also be called a thesis on the *continuity of understanding*:

‘understanding of a text’ (an arbitrary one) is a continuous process. It can be in individual receptions variously staged and, for all intents and purposes, it has no bottom, and no boundary as such as it would be possible to say of a given text that what it means in its sense is sheerly and utterly exploited. Neither scientific theories nor literary works have reistic or processual foundations of a straightforwardly visible ‘world.’ (Lem 1972: 77)

The reconstruction of the subject matter of *Confessions of an anti-semiote* can be summarized by three key words: “continuity,” “simultaneity,” and “multi-staging.” It can be easily observed that the problematics are close to the ones tackled by Pelc

creating the typology of symbolic uses of signs. To show these relations closer, one should take into consideration Lem's ruthless criticism of Todorov's structuralism.

## 4 Typology of receiving situations: the “compass card” model

Lem's essay which was critical of Todorov's structuralist theory was published in *Science Fiction Studies* and met some response, although it was weaker than it deserved. However, the literary aspects of this criticism or its exact details of reactions to it (most of them negative anyway: Astle 1975; Scholes 1975) are not the concern of this text. However, one theme deserves some particular attention: “Lem fails on a more general level ... to make the very distinction Todorov so emphasized, between abstract structure and manifestation, a distinction fundamental in linguistics between the system and the speech acts (*langue/parole*) or, in different terms, between immanence and manifestation” (Brooke-Rose 1976: 149). In light of findings from the previous section, one can say that this accusation is completely unfounded because it is based on the misunderstanding of Lem's point of view, and for him such a thing as immanent structure does not exist. The thing more important here is what Lem builds upon the ruins of Todorov's view because from the semiotic perspective, this thing is exceptionally interesting and worth attention. In this respect one can agree with the opinion that Lem's criticism was “harsh but illuminating” (Barnouw 1979: 155), and at the same time constructive.

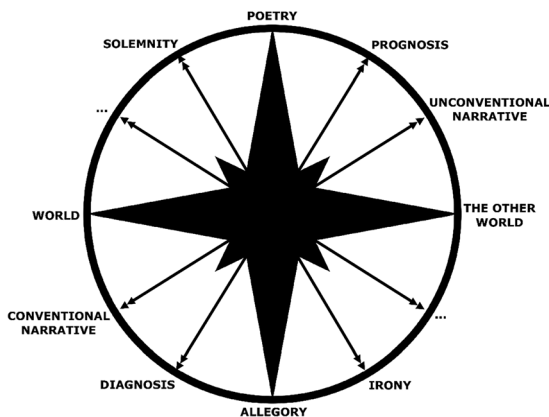
Briefly speaking, Todorov accepted the opposition between the uncanny and the marvelous. The uncanny covers situations which are astounding but explicable on the basis of available scientific knowledge, although the representations can be overly complex and quite improbable. The marvelous relates to situations where representations cannot be explained in such a manner and therefore belong to the realm of irrational and supernatural. In Todorov's view, the fantastic relates to the *reader's state of hesitation* and it is as a result suspended as to the belonging of described events to oppositional orders: “It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre” (Todorov 1973: 41). The reception of a fantastic piece is balanced between these two opposite poles of the original axis. Contrarily, Lem notices that the interpretative hesitations of the reader of fantastic are much more complex and do not stretch along a single axis but along many. Apart from Todorov's axis which simplified to the forms of natural order (world) and supernatural order (the other world), Lem in the second edition of PC introduces additional axes, such as: poetry/allegory; diagnosis/prognosis; conventional narrative/unconventional

narrative; solemnity/irony (Lem 1975b: 77, 1989: 201). This is all basis for the construction of a specific model: “[o]ne could go on enumerating such oppositions. Superimposing their axes, so that they form a multidimensional ‘compass card,’ i.e., a coordinate system with multiple axes, we obtain a formal model of the situation of the reader” (Lem 1974: 233) (see Figure 1).

This is how Lem shapes this matter in PC. However, in an article from *Science Fiction Studies*, where he still points out to the fact that many axes can be differentiated, but he gives most attention to following three (Lem 1974: 232):

- reflexive text/relative text;
- text-cryptogram/text-literal-message;
- solemnity/irony.

The first axis is an alternative between a text seen as something autonomous and referring to itself and a text which directs the reader towards something beyond itself. The second axis expresses reader’s hesitations relating to the fact whether a given message has any hidden and coded meanings or whether the text should eventually be treated literally as simply saying what it says. It can also be the case that there are interdependent axes if a given text is declared ironic, which would extend the probability of the text being self-reflexive, whereas the treatment of the text as a cryptogram implies that it directs the reader beyond itself. It is also not the case that the oppositions are absolute – there are just extreme poles of single axes. Interesting examples from the transitional sphere of the second axis are texts which are pseudo-ciphers which somehow ask the reader to be deciphered. However, such a process is futile as it involves the reader into a game which has the shape of a labyrinth without a specific end: “the first referent of a semantic relationship need not be the real world but may instead be the typology of a well-known class of



**Figure 1:** Lem’s original “compass card.” A model of an n-modal decision-making situation of the recipient faced with a complex text. Source: Lem (1975b: 74, 1989: 204).

literary games” (Lem 1973: 27). The first two axes are the most important as far as the considerations in this text are concerned because these axes relate to the basic semiotic problems. Lem’s reception model has a form of inventive typology: “‘compass card’ is not a system of inter-thematic disconnections, but a system of correlations; it allows the *gradability and coexistence* ... of text properties” (Lem 1975a: 86; emphasis mine).

The first axis, i.e., reflexive/relative, relates to the problem of reference of the text to something beyond the text. However, Lem observes that if the perspective of the recipient is taken into account, then “a text wholly severed from the world with regard to its meanings can be of no interest to anyone” (Lem 1974: 233). One can therefore deduce that there are no such texts and that there is always a reference to the world outside the text. In this respect, Lem disapproved very much of the attitude of the readers towards so-called hermetic texts full of ambiguity, veiled sense and unclear allusions. If one cannot say what exactly they mean, then they mean nothing. Lem did not accept the purist attitude in which if something means a lot, then it can mean anything, and if it is so, then eventually it means nothing. He claimed that there is always a kind of reference, but the referential properties of a text are gradable:

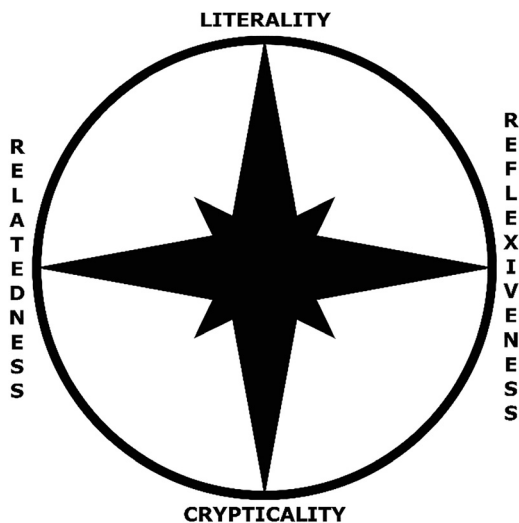
References of expressions to extralinguistic states of affairs form a *continuous spectrum*, ranging from *ostensive denotation* to an *aura of allusions* hard to define, just as recall of things seen to our visual memory ranges from sharp perception in broad daylight to the vagueness of a nocturnal phantom in the dark. Consequently, a boundary between ‘undisguised reference’ and ‘hermetic autonomy’ of a text can be drawn only arbitrarily, because the *distinction is extremely fuzzy*. (Lem 1974: 233, emphasis mine)

Thus, referentiality of a text creates a spectrum ranging from ostension to “an aura.” As a result, there is another axis with two extreme poles, and it can be turned into typology of referentiality. At this point, it would only have one dimension, but this does not end here. One can say that there is a *horizontal axis – referentiality “across,”* i.e., the first dimension of typology. Lem’s second axis – cryptogram/literal-message – provides the second dimension of typology. What is obtained is multi-staged denotation which can be called “*in-depth*” or *vertical referentiality*. In this context, it would be worthwhile to quote *Confessions of an anti-semiote*:

it is either the work that is a linguistic intermediary between the recipient and a certain objective and unmarked reality or the so-called objective reality of the work is another system of signs which has to be construed ... [W]hat is objectively pointed by articulation might as well be interpreted as an end of receptive conduct composed of *things* and *events*, or also as another attuning of signs no longer linguistically pure. (Lem 1972: 69–71, emphasis in original)

According to Lem, there is a possibility of multi-staged references, but the decisions in this respect are made by the recipients and they decide whether they want to stay on a given stage (possibly on the first one) or to continue their interpretation activity. It is the recipient's decision – a *literal meaning and simple denotation or indirect meaning and complex denotation*. This is a semiotic situation aptly described by Izydora Dąbska: sign “with a complex denotation, despite the literal meaning thanks to which it denotes *O*, also has another, indirect meaning which indirectly denotes an object symbolized by *O*” (Dąbska 2015: 252). Similarly, to Lem who thought he had generalized Todorov's attitude by proposing “a model or reception universal for all genres and all possible works” (Lem 1975b: 85), one can be tempted to *minimize Lem's model* to the form in Figure 2.

Summing up, Lem's first axis – from ostension to “an aura” – is an equivalent of Pelc's typology of the uses of signs from indicators to symbols together with the typology of symbolic uses. In turn, Lem's second axis corresponds to the feature of semantic multi-stageability of B-symbols. Moreover, Pelc also emphasizes the oscillations and interactions between literal and non-literal meaning, and the same oscillations and interactions are supposed to be iconically presented by the compass card as it is “a representation of the dynamics of reading as a game, i.e., *a named circle of wander*” (Lem 1975b: 87, emphasis mine). In Pelc's typology there is an intermediate zone, whereas Lem comes up with “the sphere of interpretative hesitation” (Lem 1972: 65). Hence, one can say that in their considerations, both the semiotician and the anti-semiote surprisingly agree with each other. The manner of their considerations may be different and they follow different paths but they both



**Figure 2:** Lem's minimal “compass card” – dynamic typology of the reception and interpretation of the uses of signs. Source: own elaboration.

move forward from the same starting point. In this sense, Lem criticized static and classifying semiotics for the sake of functional and typologizing semiotics.

## 5 Summary: the problem of contextualism

The article presents the reconstruction of Lem's semiotic beliefs and for this purpose it uses Pelc's findings in the field of functionalist bases of semiotics. Lem's "compass card" model is the most interesting which is a sophisticated and inventive use of the typological approach in semiotics. However, the topic of Lem's semiotic considerations has not yet been fully investigated mainly because the contents of PC and other mentioned essays can be related both to Lem's novels and short stories, but also to his other theoretical works and op-ed pieces. As far as semiotics is concerned, it is important to mention the matter of how radical or moderate is Lem's contextualism. In this respect, Holger Kuße opts for the moderate version of contextualism. Apart from the strong dependence of the meaning of an utterance on the interpretative activity of the recipients, one should also consider the invariants of meaning which are the contents of signs and become the contents of the process of understanding of these signs. As Kuße points out, in this respect Lem allows the occurrence of some semantic invariants and he even assumes the possibility of their existence, and as a result polysemy and the contextual conditions of signs do not lead to "a dissolution of meaning into the functionality of contexts or the intentionality of speakers" (Kuße 2008: 76). There is no doubt as to the second part of this quoted alternative and surely Lem would not let the meaning 'dissolve' there. However, as it can be seen, Kuße deals with the questions of the sending of signs, which goes beyond the perspective of the theory of reception and enters the theory of creation which Lem discussed mainly in his *Fantasyka i futurologia* (The fantastic and futurology). Undoubtedly, the problem of the power of contextualism in Lem's semiotics occurs and one can say that his *contextualism is at least moderate*. In an essay in *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* Lem pointed out that in the study of communication processes "the practical rule is that the more unambiguous and context-free the code is, the narrower the semantic scope of a code is" (Lem 1984: 256). Perhaps Lem's contextualism similarly to contextualism of Pelc's semiotic functionalism is placed *between moderate and radical* versions (Ciecierski 2021: 88). Willy-nilly, the intermediate zone occurs. Therefore, one 'bounces off' one extreme end in the form of radical contextualism, according to which "the entire idea of the semantic content looks problematic as reducible to the idea of the utterance interpretation given certain assumptions about the conversational situation" (Ciecierski and Grabarczyk 2020: 3). The problematics of the idea of semantic

contents fit in perfectly within the scope of Lem's interests and one can even risk saying that this idea is one of the main topics of PC. In this sense, one can see the validity and value of Lem's "semiotic expedition." Therefore, it is not to be excluded that they can make a considerable contribution into current discussions. However, this is a topic for a separate study.

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